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ESSAY

Poly Wants a Leaker

By William Safire

WASHINGTON — The muffled voice on the phone told me to be in a bar near the White House in a half-hour, if I wanted a message from "the halls of Montezuma." Since I know no family by the name of Hall in Mexico, I took that to be a veiled reference to "the shores of Tripoli," suggesting a leak from intelligence sources about Libya. I grabbed the latest clippings about dictator Qaddafi, put on my galoshes (which really leak) and rushed across Farragut Square to my rendezvous.

The story was this: A month ago, a Libyan general wounded Muammar Qaddafi in an assassination attempt. The dictator was flown to Moscow for treatment, and over 600 Libyan soldiers and politicians had since been put to death. Col. Qaddafi was now back in Tripoli, holed up in a bunker. Hot stuff, huh?

Some big leak: I handed my source a clipping from an inside page of The New York Times of a week ago. An Associated Press dispatch recounted the event and added that the Libyan strongman had been wounded in the jaw and named the dead assassin. But the story had not received much play, and no TV film was available, so not many people knew about it. Glumly, my source muttered that he or she could not be responsible for the C.I.A.'s being a week behind in its newspaper reading.

This thrilling, real-life episode illustrates the atmosphere in Mr. Reagan's Washington, a capital currently suffering from one of its periodic outbreaks of leakomania. As always, because the problem has been exaggerated, the solution has become the problem.

More than a score of Administration officials have been humiliated by the Carlucci Chastity Test. This lie-detection examination, which demeans both giver and taker, is designed not so much to discover who leaked national security secrets but to intimidate any Government official who dares to reveal or help avoid potential political embarrassments.

The CCT is the brainwashing child of Frank Carlucci, who has long been to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger what Frank Nitti was to Al Capone—a permanent underboss, an enforcer of that combination of lockjaw and lockstep that helps insiders combat their insecurities. It is the first priority of the new N.S.C. chief "Judge" Clark—here come de plumber.

With all due piety, the crackdown on internal dissent is being conducted in the name of national security. People on the inside often confuse national se-

crets, and the methods the C.I.A. uses to learn what is happening in Tripoli) with the secrecy that endangers the nation by cloaking the development of policy. Much secrecy, like much welfare, is not directed to the truly needy.

Self-hypnosis then begins, as sycophants begin to extend the President's righteous worry about genuine security leaks with his irritation at seeing the contents of his State of the Union address in print before he delivers it. (Let's watch for Churchill quotes.) When Mr. Reagan began his bimonthly news conference last week with a crack about leaks, he was kidding—but he wasn't kidding.

When Lyndon Johnson became enraged at leaks, he would change his mind so as to make the leaks inaccurate—and thus was controlled by leakers. When Richard Nixon caught leakomania, he launched the plumbers operation in room 16 of the Executive Office Building. I went past that basement office the other day; the room number has been removed, but the spirit may be coming back.

An Administration that makes extensive use of polygraphs on its own people is a short step from wiretaps. And wiretaps on Government sources soon slop over to wiretaps on media outlets; that is how the solution becomes the problem.

The Carlucci-Clark plumbing operation is not directed at those who want to weaken our defense by leaking genuine secrets; such disservicemen are better thwarted by "bigot lists" and other counterespionage devices with which Mr. Carlucci is familiar.

In effect, the New Plumbers are out to scare other Reagan officials—many of them troubled hardliners—into silence. How can Mr. Reagan be saved from the ravages of leakomania? How can he be shown that his legitimate concern for protecting the truly-needy secret must not be perverted into a chilling operation that undermines national-security policy-making?

One way is ridicule; I have already asked an antiques dealer to search for a chastity belt to send to Mr. Carlucci. Another way is for the press to accept the challenge and to urge officials to drive the plumbers batty.

Therefore, send your policy-development leaks to your favorite newsman, through a cutout, if necessary, to defeat the polygraph. My own Washington address is 1000 Connecticut Avenue—no zip code needed for leaks—and for starters, let's have the memcon on Al Haig's secret meeting with Fidel